

VZCZCXRO6068
PP RUEHDE
DE RUEHAD #3687 2611345
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 181345Z SEP 06
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6991
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE
RUEHRO/AMEMBASSY ROME 0820
RUEHROV/AMEMBASSY VATICAN

UNCLAS ABU DHABI 003687

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PREL](#) [KMDR](#) [KPAO](#) [VT](#) [AE](#)

SUBJECT: UAEG "REGRETS" POPE'S REMARKS ON ISLAM, ADDING
CALL FOR MODERATE RESPONSE

¶1. (U) Pope Benedict XVI's reported remarks on Islam have received a modest degree of coverage in UAE printed media since the story broke, with front-page mention of the incident and associated reactions in the Muslim world, as well as inside-page editorial emphasizing the potential damage done to a meaningful interfaith dialogue.

¶2. (SBU) The UAEG, which had not commented previously, added its "regret" over the remarks in a statement issued by the Cabinet on September 17, describing the Pope's comments as "a radical turn from the path of his predecessor Pope John Paul II that held respect for Islam and encouraged dialogue" and as "a stumbling block for ongoing dialogue to promote inter-faith harmony." Calling in the statement for "reason and mutual respect" between religions (particularly the revealed religions), the UAEG also conveyed its concerns directly to the Vatican representative in Abu Dhabi in a joint meeting with the UAE Justice Minister and Minister of State for Foreign Affairs on September 17. (Comment: The UAEG likely found these steps necessary to forestall public anger in a nation where public demonstrations are tightly controlled and the rulers prefer to prevent emotional issues from building up steam. End comment.)

¶3. (U) Presidential religious advisor Ali Al-Hashemi, in a September 18 comment in the semi-official Arabic daily Al-Ittihad, called for the Pope to apologize to Muslims and to cite more balanced sources when discussing Islam (not citing sources harboring "malice" towards Islam, as Al-Hashemi implies the Pope did in this instance). Also in Al-Ittihad, and on the official WAM web site, Under Secretary of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs Dr. Hamdan bin Musalem Al-Mazrouie, in a call for moderation, said that respect for the "people of the book" should prevent Muslims from "going beyond the Shariah" (i.e., over-reacting) in responding to the Pope's statements.
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